A PROGRESS REPORT ON THE ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT

of

CAROL B. KOEHLER

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PROJECT

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Approved

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PREFACE

A Progress Report on the Artistic Development of Carol B. Koehler includes an exhibition of thirty drawings and paintings by the artist and an exposition of her esthetic philosophy. These thoughts and creative works were organized for the purpose of demonstrating the artist's recent progress in painting and evaluating the direction in which her work is moving. The pictures were painted in the years 1950-1951 and assembled at the studio home of the painter for a public exhibition on May 25, 1952. In addition to the actual creative endeavor, the work involved included selection of appropriate paintings for the show, the framing of all these works, the designing of the invitations and programs, and the actual hanging and staging of the exhibition.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The problem of any painter is to express himself in paint. But the problem of a beginning painter is more complex than that. His activities are still exploratory -- concerned with experimentation in different mediums, with testing varied techniques and methods, and with the formation of his esthetic philosophy. As an immature painter Carol Koehler is trying to do all of these things. To explain her present approach to painting she has prepared a statement concerning her esthetic attitude and an exhibition of her drawings and paintings.

ESTHETIC NOTES

Painting is visual philosophy. It is a beautiful and profound language, a vital spiritual communication between sensitive individuals. It transcends time and space, and reaches those throughout eternity who are receptive to its expression. It is functionally necessary to the lives of some men, but useless and unwanted in the existences of others. It is created by men of vision and genius who have something essential to communicate, and who are able to express themselves fully and well. It is received by individuals with perception of equally high fidelity who have need for a spiritual interpretation of life and who admire truth and
love beauty. It requires intelligent attention from an audience, as well as able revelation from an artist.

Paintings are capable of stimulating many different facets of human character, and so contain something of value for each observer. They are beautiful to the eye, profound to the intelligence, appealing to the imagination, stimulating to the emotions, and inspiring to the spirit. There are few great paintings that are perfect enough to strike all these chords, but there are many good ones that communicate with at least one aspect of man's nature.

In order for an artist to successfully convey a message from his emotions or intellect he must be free to choose the means for his expression. Limiting the manner in which he may make his statement often inhibits the artist or distorts the meaning of his intelligence. It is essential to the healthy progress of art that an artist be free to express himself in a straightforward, personal way. His personality should be the selective agent of style and method, not tradition, teacher, or another painter, since only the creator knows the exact content of what he desires to impart.

The pleasure and beauty to be found in full freedom of esthetic exploration are worth every struggle against crystallized tradition, with its lifeless rules for art and its sterile formulas for paintings. The vit-
ality, the strength, and the imagination in much of modern painting are the results of the liberation of individual artists from the mental captivity of the past. They are visible proof of the intelligence and vision a painter can demonstrate if he is given the intellectual freedom he so much needs. All the greatest painters of past eras were able to produce creatively only because they were deaf to the criticisms of small men of their locale and day. An artist cannot let himself be too much influenced by place and moment. These are elements he must transcend with his spirit and imagination, since in the long view of history they fall into obscurity anyway.

The esthetic expression is a very personal means of communication. The manner in which a statement is made is the artist's own, just as the content is of an individual nature. The painter attempts to express his ideas, his emotions, his impressions of life, and his visions to anyone who can appreciate and share these experiences with him. A painting devoid of all natural human expression is as colorless and uninteresting as a dull person incapable of communicating with his fellow men.

An artist must have something of importance to say, as well as the technical mastery to say it beautifully. What he wishes to convey
depends upon his inner self. If he has no knowledge of his real creative self, then his pictures will say very little. It is incumbent upon a painter to discover his true nature and his particular means of expression in order to produce paintings that are truly of the language of art. To know oneself, and then to be true to oneself, are difficult requirements for any individual, but especially for a young and immature artist who is beset with numerous problems of a painterly nature.

A painting should be perfect, complete only when the artist can no longer improve upon the communication. Perfection of the expression, however, is not the same as meticulous precision of workmanship. The former concerns a full execution of the message in the spiritual diction of painting, and the latter concerns the academic stress on minutae, sometimes irrelevant to the expression and always subordinate to it. A meaningless and insignificant statement employing perfect grammar is never as valuable a communication as wise words, crudely organized. A beginning painter should attempt a fulness and perfection of expression, disregarding the temporary lack of maturity and finish which will develop with time and further experience.

It is also essential to have a perfectly constructed painting, one in which the parts work in a fully complementary relationship.
In order to achieve a perfectly working picture, the painting must be a simple statement, a basic construction in which all the elements are essential. The pith of the message must be expressed in a way that is straightforward, direct, and honest. Such an approach leads naturally to a sententious and unified whole.

At the present time the artist's efforts in painting are concerned largely with an attempt to find herself—her really expressive nature that has been covered with a veneer of education. The main trend in her work is of this nature. The pictures are ideas and visions drawn from memory and imagination, simply and crudely expressed. Real progress in this expressionism was first made in water color, a medium neglected by the painter for six years and attacked with renewed interest and enthusiasm in 1950. A sudden change to a more personal way of working resulted from this reversion to a more fluid and expressive medium. Painting in water color requires a rather free and loose approach which comes more naturally when the artist is unhindered by rules, in this instance, long forgotten. But when this medium had served its purpose it was put aside temporarily for an improved and more vital approach to oil painting.

The first few months of the new approach to water colors in the summer of 1950 produced nothing of worth, but the more fully developed
attitude was successful in liberating the means of execution. It was not until later that year that some exciting and expressive paintings were created, among them *Within* and *Red* and *Grandfather Waiting*. These pictures resulted from great effort, real spiritual necessity, a definite aim for a simple concise statement, and a primitive joy in the fulness of pure color.

A year later, in 1951, the oil paintings began to show the influence of freeing experiences with water colors. *Cathedral Procession* was the first of the expressionist oils. It was painted from pure inner inspiration. It was followed, in 1952, by such other freely painted pictures as *Under the Arbor* and *Through the Grove*.

Paralleling the more freely painted expressionist pictures, there is a series of geometrically constructed abstracts represented by *Shaw's Landing* and *Sea at Point Lobos*. This approach to painting shows a too conscious attempt at being compositionally correct and intellectually concise. It is lacking in real honesty of expression. But such problem pictures are necessary in a painter's developmental process. They are in contrast to the more abandoned way of working, and they exemplify for the painter the sterile and lifeless products that result when only the intellect is at work.
What the revelation of an inner self and the desire for a free and perfect means of communication will lead to cannot be predicted. If honesty of effort in direct expression continues it is possible that the painter may one day gain the power to use effectively the language of art. But until then, the struggle for self-discovery will proceed, carried forward by the intense desire of the artist to express her visual contemplations for others to understand and enjoy.
APPENDIX

A STATEMENT BY THE COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN

MR. PAUL D. BECKMAN

It is important to remember in observing Carol Koehler's drawings and paintings that the art of a graduate student constitutes a progress report on a changeful art rather than the summary of an art career. Carol, with a wide diversity of approach and a varied method of expression, presents an exciting individual statement, and she gives us an excellent opportunity to determine and evaluate the direction in which her work is moving.

Before we look let us listen to the advice of John Marin who said, "Art--something that exists completely within itself--gives of itself only to sensitive people--for they approach it rightly. . . . I would suggest (as an exercise) that sometime you take your two eyes along with you--and leave your intellect and your friends' intellects at home--you might without these handicaps see things that would surprise you."

For the subject matter of her paintings Carol generally selects people that are close to her, or seascapes, or landscapes that she may involve in some private imaginative interpretation. For this I would call her a Romantic Expressionist. As an observer you must bring an open mind and as sensitive an emotional approach as possible. Then it is my
belief that many will find Carol Koehler's work both pleasurable and emotionally satisfying.

My suggestion to Carol is that she remember that anyone who is easily discouraged (but must feed upon public recognition) does not stand much chance of realizing the esthetic potentialities which reside within the spirit. For, as Allen S. Weller has pointed out, "a work of art is not an imitation of anything which exists outside itself." It is itself "a complete and independent experience".